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## Perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants in the United States

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PERCEPTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG NIGERIAN  
IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Francis Ikefule Nwagbara

June 2004

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Francis Ikefule Nwagbara  
June 2004

Approved by:

  
Dr. Trang Hoang, Faculty Supervisor  
Social Work

6/1/04  
Date

  
Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,  
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

## ABSTRACT

Nigerian immigrants have been largely excluded from studies on issues relating to immigrants living in American Society. Too often, they are grouped with the general category of African Americans. The problem with this grouping is that it fails to capture the unique issue presented by the Nigerian immigrants living in American Society.

This study examined the perception of domestic violence among Nigerians and their help seeking behavior for counseling. The literature has not covered how African Culture affected Nigerian Americans' perceptions of domestic violence. This study hopes to shed light in this area. Ten married Christian Nigerians (5 men and 5 women) from one ethnic group (Ibo) participated in the study. Face to face interviews were conducted. Six dimensions were considered: 1. Definition of domestic violence; 2. Attitudes towards the use of interpersonal violence; 3. Attitudes towards causes of domestic violence; 4. Justification or condemnation of domestic violence; 5. Coping with domestic violence and help seeking behavior for counseling; 6. Post immigration views on domestic violence.

Respondents defined domestic violence in terms of physical, verbal, emotional and economic acts of abuse, and did not mention sexual and psychological acts of abuse. Nigerian men and women did not indicate that the use of violence in the home is an effective problem-solving strategy. Domestic violence was attributed to individual, cultural and environmental factors. Nigerian participants did not indicate that the use of violence is justified.

Participants' report of help seeking behavior indicated that they would use the family first before consulting a professional. They reported that coming to America has changed their views about domestic violence. Gender differences, age and length of residence in the United States were noted as factors related to their perception of domestic violence.

Results from the study indicated a need for more education on domestic violence, and culturally appropriate prevention and counseling techniques in addressing domestic violence among the Nigerian immigrant population. Considering the strong cultural proscription against help-seeking, outreach efforts to this population must address cultural barriers to recognition of abuse

and to help-seeking behaviors. Limitations included a small sample size and homogeneity of the sample.

Therefore, future research should include a larger number of married Nigerian men and women as well as those from other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To all the respondents in this study and all those who never failed to ask, "how is the thesis going" I say thank you.

Nwagbara Francis

June 2004



## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife-Uloma Urewuaku Nwagbara and children: Okechi Anozie, Uchechukwu Anozie, Chinyere Anozie and my first seed on earth late Prince Onyinyechi Anozie. Prince, Daddy loves you. May your soul rest in peace.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

With a conservative United Nation estimate of 120 million people, Nigeria is the most populated nation in Africa. However, it has been only in the past twenty years that the United States had experienced an influx of Nigerian immigrants. The majority of U.S. immigrants came from Mexico, Europe, Asia, Middle East, the Caribbean, and South America. In June 2001, the U.S. Census Survey documented that Nigerian immigrants make up about 2.5 percent of all immigrants in the United States. Due to multiple problems in Nigeria, more people are immigrating to the United States in anticipation of a better life and in search of means to take care of their families. Nigeria is buffeted by high scale corruption in government, an adverse international environment, a heavy debt bunter, a deteriorating physical infrastructure and excessive political uncertainty. This is a country immensely blessed with a dynamic, enterprising population and a wealth of natural resources, especially petroleum. Unfortunately, since its independence on October 1, 1960, from the British government, self-serving economic

policies of whom, coupled with unprecedented political instability, have dampened the prospects of immense development. Nigeria has moved from a fast developing country in the early 1970s, to the giant of Africa in the mid-1980s, to a poverty-stricken third world country (Onyia, 1994).

According to Onyia (1994), this sorry state could have been avoided, "but Nigeria is unfortunate to have witnessed selfish leaders who legitimized corruption and grabbed as much as they could from the national treasury" (p. 6). Presently, there is no foreseeable hope in things improving in Nigeria in the near future.

In spite of limited resources for the foreign-born, people continue to immigrate to the United States with the hope that a new place and a new life will be better. And when immigrants come to this country, they do not leave behind their values, attitudes, traditions, and beliefs. They bring along with them their own traditions, in hope that these traditions will serve them well in their quest to adapt to their new home.

When Nigerians or any other group immigrate to the United States, there is a process referred to as acculturation. This process, along with attempts to meet

basic human needs on a daily basis, can produce a very stress filled experience for the immigrants (Ho, 1987).

It is apparent that immigration and acculturation can cause a tremendous amount of stress for the family. Members of the family, both young and old, are faced with learning a new language, new social norms, and many other factors, which may clash with their native upbringing. Feelings of isolation and despair are common among new immigrants. The family structure may also suffer as a result of acculturation. Restructuring of roles and functions may also occur (Ho, 1987). For example, the traditional hierarchical structure may experience conflict as a result of the father/husband becoming unemployed. For the Nigerian population, in which hierarchical structure places the father/husband in the dominant role, a conflict may occur when the woman's employment status may become essential to the family's survival but it also can threaten the role of the father as the dominant provider. Poor economic conditions and stress in connection with the acculturation process can produce many conflicting results (Ho, 1987). Further more the experience of living in two cultures "is inherently conflictive as opposed to enriching" (Curtis, 1990,

p. 149). The extent to which dominant cultural behaviors and values are expressed and traditional native values are preserved depends on the level of acculturation.

#### Problem Statement

Studies on domestic violence have indicated that violence against men and women is a widespread phenomenon occurring in all economic, cultural, and ethnic groups and can have both physical and mental health consequences (Levinson, 1989). Although domestic violence has been a focus of scientific research during the last two decades, the issue of domestic violence in Nigerian immigrant community or any other immigrant community in the United States has not been comprehensively examined and discussed within the mainstream literature on domestic violence (Hoann, 1999). Family violence in immigrant communities like Nigeria deserves more research attention because of their unique situation as immigrants (Hoann, 1999). On one hand, immigrant men and women have brought their traditional cultures and their experiences with large norms and social structure of their countries of origin to America. On the other hand, they have also internalized to some degree American culture as a result



of resettlement and adoption to a new life, and they and their families often experience stress related to relocation and a change in social status (Hoann, 1999).

Although the Nigerian communities in the United States has grown rapidly since the past two decades (Salami, 2003), perception of domestic violence among Nigerian American families has not been studied. Nigerians or any immigrant family may be particularly vulnerable to domestic violence given the high level of acculturation stress and gender role reversal experienced in a new country (Campbell, 1992). However, the traditional view common to Nigerian Americans or any other immigrant communities that wife beating is a private matter often prevents battered women from talking with people outside their families about their perceptions of domestic violence (Hoann, 1999).

The domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants in the United States is in many respects quite similar to the domestic violence in Nigeria. Domestic violence in the United States is a very serious problem that has been neglected until the last twenty years. According to the National Coalition against Domestic Violence, women are four times more likely than men to be killed by their

spouses or domestic partners. Nationally, FBI statistics show that a woman is battered every 15 seconds and that more than one fourth of all murders of women are committed by spouses.

Among married Nigerian couples in the US, there are problems in their relationships (Amajioyi, 1995). Nigerian culture does not allow women to take their problems to non-family members. They react to situations differently but one common feature is the clear spirit of togetherness amongst the family. Everyman is his brother's keeper (Ofoegbu, 1991).

The population in this research project is the Nigerian immigrant community in the United States. Although considerable resources have been devoted to the study of immigrants, historically, there has been a lack of attention to the study of Nigerian immigrant groups in the United States (Salami, 2003). An understanding of how Nigerian immigrants view domestic violence in American society would be important for social workers and others with whom they might work with.

A qualitative method of research was used in acquiring information that led to the understanding of how married Nigerian immigrants perceive domestic

violence in American society. A qualitative method was used because this researcher aimed to explore a new topic and not much study has been done on this population.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants in the United States. The findings also offered an opportunity to understand how acculturation impacted the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants and their help seeking behavior for counseling.

In June 2001, the U.S. census survey documented that Nigerian immigrants make up about 2.5 percent of all immigrants in the United States (Salami, 2003), yet almost no literature exists on domestic violence for this population. Although many studies have been conducted on domestic violence and published in the United States, the populations studied were predominately women of the mainstream culture (Yick, 1997). In contrast, there was no literature on the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants.

Cultural values and norms shared in one's country of origin can exert influences on how immigrants perceive

and respond to domestic violence (Yoshihama, 2001). Immigrants' perceptual, and behavioral responses to partner's or domestic violence can be shaped by their socio-cultural backgrounds (Yoshihama, 2001). What is considered domestic violence or a specific meaning given to a partner's act varies across cultural groups (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 1993). Such socio-cultural variations in perception of domestic violence have important ramifications for resource with immigrant populations (Yoshihama, 2001). How then do Nigerian immigrants view domestic violence in American society? The results of this study provide an understanding of how Nigerian immigrants perceive domestic violence and implication for prevention and intervention with this population.

American women in this society also suffer from the hands of their partners and become victims of their own sexism. It is therefore important to recognize that women in every society suffer the stigma associated with wife abuse that occurs in all cultures (Yoshihama, 2001).

## Significance of the Project to Social Work Practice

This project is significant to social work practice because the growing population of Nigerian immigrants in the United States require culturally appropriate social work support. Nigerian immigrants present unique social needs and intervention modalities, which must be addressed by social work practitioners. As Nigerians immigrate to the United States, their effort in assimilating and adjusting to the new culture becomes a societal concern. On that note, their social welfare must be protected through social work practice. The social work practitioner's intervention may occur in the form of education, program development, and counseling taking into account the unique situation of Nigerian immigrants who identify with African cultural perspectives.

While each social service professional cannot know every culture completely, it is essential to maintain an attitude of openness to the variety of cultural values and to that of one's own values. Therefore the influence of socio-cultural factors on various aspects of behavior including Nigerian immigrants' perception of wife

domestic violence, acculturation, and other social issues need to be investigated.

An understanding of the acculturation level of Nigerian immigrants into the American society will be important for social workers that come into contact with this population. Cultural competence is a requirement in most practices now and social workers and other practitioners are being forced to learn about the different cultures of other groups of people so that they can be better equipped to give a helping hand. As I stated earlier, not much research has been done on this population and that is the reason why I feel that the findings of this study will be useful to social workers when dealing with this population.

Social workers should be aware that in many African countries the use of corporal punishment is a common disciplinary technique and should therefore understand that possible resistance to help seeking for counseling among abused Nigerian immigrants is due to culture. The findings of this study is also a call for social workers to continue to educate the African immigrant community as a whole, about the seriousness of wife abuse as well as other types of abuse. With more and more families from

African countries immigrating to the United States, it is important that social workers make a concerted effort to reach out to these new immigrants to provide information and support.

This study was guided by this research question:  
What is the perception of domestic violence among  
Nigerian immigrants?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Studies on domestic violence have indicated that violence against wives is a wide spread phenomenon occurring in all economic, cultural, and ethnic groups and can have physical injuries and mental health consequences (Levison, 1989; Hoann, 1999). Historically the issue of domestic violence as a social problem is long standing (Gelles, 1979). Social and legal attitudes favored the use of violence between partners (Gelles, 1979), giving political, economic, and ideological support for a husband's authority over his wife that included the approval of his use of physical force against her (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). The use of physical violence is one of the most brutal expressions of the hierarchy of patriarchal domination in which the position of women and men has historically been structured with men above, possessing, and controlling women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Obbe, 1980; Onuaguluchi, 1986). Regardless of one's cultural and social background, violence against



partners is oppressive and should not be tolerated (Pagelow, 1981).

This chapter is divided as follows: a) definition of domestic violence, b) prevalence of domestic violence in America, c) theories of violence, d) perception of domestic violence among immigrants, e) Nigerian family structure and domestic violence, f) and the final section will address acculturation and how it shapes the view of Nigerian immigrants about domestic violence.

#### Definition of Domestic Violence

Although domestic violence can involve child abuse and elderly abuse, for the purpose of this paper, domestic violence refers to spousal abuse, specifically wife beating. Therefore, in this study the words spouse abuse and wife beating or battering will be used interchangeably and it will have the same meaning as wife abuse.

The study of perceptions of domestic violence is in part based on social learning theories that maintain that the social context plays a role in shaping belief systems, which may ultimately affect behaviors (Finn, 1986). If attitudes are the underlying structures of

behaviors, then understanding perceptions of domestic violence will shed light on the etiology and maintenance of domestic violence. There is very little consensus about the definitions of domestic violence (Campbell, 1992). In general, professionals concur that: 1) there are three types of spouse abuse: physical, psychological, and sexual; 2) the public tends to define domestic violence in terms of physical force; and 3) the public is less tolerant of interpersonal violence than it has been in the past (Yick, 1997).

Dickstein (1988) defined spouse abuse as "a behavior pattern that occurs in physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic forms, used to maintain fear, intimidation, control and power by the abuser" (p. 612).

#### Prevalence of Domestic Violence in America

Recent statistics published by the Domestic Violence Branch of the Office of Criminal Justice are alarming. One woman is beaten every 15 seconds; about 4.9 million women are battered each year (Office of Criminal Justice, 2001). In California in 2001, 198,031 domestic violence or battering incidents were reported which reflects an

increase from 2000. The National Crime Victimization Survey found that nearly 50% of all female homicide victims were killed by their husbands, former husbands, or boyfriends in contrast with just over 3% of male homicide victims killed by their wives (Danis, 2003).

### Theories of Violence

A variety of theories have been developed to explain wife abuse. At the individual level of analysis, some schools concluded that wife abuse was associated with personality disorders of battered women (Gleason, 1993). Others asserted that psychological and mental disorders in the batterers caused wife beating. Research findings on the effect of personality disorders in battered women on their victimization, however, are unclear and inconclusive (Hoann, 1999). According to Gelles and Cornell (1990), it is problematic to attribute the behavior of battered women to their having a personality disorder because the personality of a battered woman could be a result of victimization.

In addition, contradictory evidence has shown that only a small proportion of all domestic violence involves people with mental illness or disorders and the majority

of cases could not be explained with these theories (Gelles, 1993). In short, there is little support for the proposition that personality disorders either in the batterers or in the victims cause domestic violence (Hoann, 1999).

At the sociological and structural levels of analysis, the family violence theory has been used to explain violence against women (Hoann, 1999). The Family violence theory considers physical attacks on a spouse as tactics in response to conflicts of interest inherent in family life (Gelles, 1979). In this perspective, the husband and the wife can hold power equally; wife abuse occurs more in families in which the husband has more power, and husband abuse occurs more often in wife dominant families. The family is also viewed as an arena where violent behavior is learned and transmitted across generations.

There has been considerable controversy about the degree of empirical support from family violence research. A number of studies have found that wives are as violent as husbands (Brown & Dutton, 1986), but other researchers have concluded that based on the United States and cross cultural studies, abuse is asymmetrical

and women are more often abused (Levinson, 1989). Research on the effects of family as an arena for violent behavior to be learned also has produced contradictory results. A number of studies found that batterers had been abused as children or they had witnessed their fathers beating their mothers (Cesar, 1988), but other studies did not find a significant relationship between experiencing violence in childhood and wife abuse (Emery, 1989; Gelles & Cornell, 1990). The inconsistency in these findings may be due to a consideration of power imbalance between husband and wife on the part of family violence theory.

#### Perception of Domestic Violence Among Immigrants

Some scholars argue that race and ethnicity affect perceptions of domestic violence (Ho, 1990). Yick (1997), for example, reported that many Latino women believe that their husbands have a right to hit them. Torres (1991) found that Anglo-American women perceived more incidents to be abusive than did their Mexican American counterparts. Moreover, psychological aggression was perceived to be less abusive by Mexican American women. Torres concluded that Hispanic cultural values about

gender roles shaped Mexican American women's definitions of domestic violence. There is not much literature about how African culture affects Nigerian immigrants' perception of domestic violence. This study seeks to fill that gap.

Most cross-cultural studies using the feminist perspective have assumed a universal and homogeneous social structure and culture in each society and have overlooked the differences in the gender structure in different nations as well as the variation of culture between various groups in each society. However, the few existing studies on violence in immigrant's families have suggested that culture could affect women's perception of family violence (Hoann, 1999).

This issue of cultural and structural variance among ethnic communities is of particular importance for the understanding of domestic violence in immigrant communities. Immigrant people in the United States can be influenced by more than one culture; the culture of their countries of origin, which is practiced and even reinforced in immigrant communities, and American culture. The effect of each culture on the behavior of

immigrant people will vary depending on the process of assimilation.

Immigrant people, however, differ considerably in their potential for assimilation. Immigrants most likely to be assimilated are those with potential for cultural compatibility, which is highly dependent on the ability to speak English; those with little education, minimal occupational skills, and poor English are more likely to live on the fringe of American society. Also, some groups may actively resist assimilation and emphasize preserving ethnic identity (Hoann, 1999).

#### Nigerian Culture and Family Structure

According to (Obayi, 1986), families of Nigerian descent may be characterized as having a hierarchical structure in which roles and powers are ascribed primarily according to age and gender: Towards this end, the man is regarded as the head of the household; women are taught to submit and defer to his authority. Close family ties, family harmony, the practice of "saving face," and efforts to avoid bringing shame upon the family name maintain this family structure. These values place a considerable pressure on family members to keep

their conflicts "private" because to do otherwise is to "shame" the family. The collective welfare of family members, rather than individual needs and wants, is valued. Keeping the family intact and harmonious at any cost becomes the dominant goal. These cultural norms are likely to influence how a woman deals with a male partner's abuse toward her (Obianyo, 1986).

#### How Nigerian Society Views Domestic Violence

Wife beating is very common and habitual practice in many homes in Nigeria (Obayi, 1986). It happens in the villages among the less privileged and also in the urban cities among the rich and the educated. The village beating often consists of numerous blows frequently with a piece of wood. Urban beatings on the other hand appear to be a one-sided wrestling or boxing match in which blows are given by clenched fists and the body kicked, wrenched and twisted (Obianyo, 1986).

There are two distinct societal views of the practice of wife beating or domestic violence. According to Obianyo (1986), on the one hand, it is seen as the necessary function of the husband with the purpose of controlling and training the wife. Wife beating is thus



reasoned to be comparable to corporal punishment for children. The other view is that wife beating is a shameless loss of self-control. The distinction seems to suggest that in one form it may be an act of discipline and in the other, a manifestation of lack of discipline. Whereas the village woman is willing to accept wife beating in principle and only hopes it may be moderated or curbed, the urban lady is ashamed, subjugated and finds it intolerable (Obianyo, 1986).

#### The Nigerian Police and Domestic Violence

The Nigerian criminal code; section 6 as cited by Balogun (1986), asserts that the husband cannot commit the offense of rape on the wife. The police therefore cannot prosecute a case of rape reported by a wife against her husband; the exception being of course if the spouses have been separated legally. Members of the family are often reluctant to report their family crimes to the police. It is amazing how often manslaughter or even murder is concealed and settled internally in the family. This secrecy frustrates the police who are determined to stamp out such social vices (Balogun, 1986).

When a wife lodges a complaint of assault against her husband with the police, the initial action of the police is not to compile a case file and dispatch to court, but rather to take the line of reconciliation. When, however, the complaint is more serious like a case of murder, the police will take the case to court but quite often the court considers it with more leniency than its equivalent without the family tie (Balogun, 1986).

#### Nigerian Law and Domestic Violence

In Nigerian law, violence is not just confined to physical violence per se, but may take the form of conduct of such a nature that is unreasonable for a spouse to continue to live with the partner. At times the mental torture consequent on taciturnity, the persistent nagging or unreasonable sexual demands or denials of a spouse is a weightier act of violence than physical violence (Akpamgbo, 1986).

Under the customary law, a husband has a right to chastise or otherwise correct his wife within reason for misconduct that infringes on his right or threatens his position as the head of household. For example, the

husband can inflict corporal punishment upon the wife for adultery, keeping bad company, indolence or insubordination. In unjust cases the wife can seek redress in one of three places such as her maiden family, her husband's family, or the law courts. According to Akpamgbo (1986), report of matrimonial offense to the law courts should be the last resort.

But under the customary and general law, each spouse owes the other a duty to satisfy the other's reasonable sexual demands. Under the general law, a husband has no legal right to compel his wife by physical force to have sex with him. If he did he would be guilty of common assault and it will be rape if the parties are separated.

As cited by Akpamgbo (1986), in Nigerian legal practice and before the Matrimonial Cause Rules Act No. 18 of 1970, the word cruelty is used instead of violence. With promulgation of the 1970 Act, conduct of such a nature the petitioner cannot reasonably be expected to live with the respondent. The subject of legal cruelty is beset with difficulty. The relationship between husband and wife is too intimate to be tested by arbitrary standards. The vagaries of human nature are immeasurable and the interrelationship of one personality with another

is not to be measured by any yardstick (Akpamgbo, 1986). Therefore, the issue of cruelty can only be determined after a review of the entire married life.

Under the customary law, a husband has no right to confine his wife with a view to enforcing his right to her consortium, but a man has a right to use moral force to restrain his wife or forbid her leaving the house. If she ignores him and goes away he cannot employ physical force to prevent his wife leaving him and no court has the right to compel an unwilling wife to return to her matrimonial home (Akpamgbo, 1986). This is in line with the provision of the constitution on human rights that guarantees freedom of association.

Apart from the criminal law on assault, rape, and civil remedy of divorce, Nigerian law has not provided sufficient legal remedy to one who has unjustifiably been a victim of domestic violence (Akpamgbo, 1986).

#### Causes of Domestic Violence or Wife Beating in Nigeria

In Nigeria male chauvinism perpetuated by traditional and governmental laws has virtually made a woman the personal possession of her husband. The traditional high bride price is partly responsible for

awarding the husband the implicit ownership over the wife who must obey without question. After the age of 21 years a girl can administer her affairs without parental control but at marriage, she reverts to infancy and requires her husband's approval and consent for most of her transactions. Men who beat their wives do so in the belief that they are dealing with their property (Onuaguluchi, 1986).

According to Onuaguluchi (1986) some women are extremely mouthy and would not allow their husbands to put a word in edgeways. They rain abuse on the man, telling him how useless and incompetent he is compared to a neighbor or relative. The man then charges, becomes incensed and opts to show the wife that at least he is physically superior by beating her mercilessly.

Childless wives suffer from physical assaults from their husbands and unbearable humiliations from their in-laws often aiming at pushing them out of the matrimonial home so that a new wife could come in and bear children. Procreation is one of the major aims of marriage among African families (Denga, 1982). Morris (1971) states that there is extreme concern among Nigerian families to have as many children as possible.

Fertility is regarded as a blessing and barrenness as a curse. Morris further reported that a Nigerian couple would take all the necessary measures including sacrificing to gods, consulting medical and native doctors, herbalists, and diviners to insure that the curse of barrenness is removed.

Barrenness represents a potentially serious source of conflict, quarrels, dissensions, and other forms of maladjustment in many Nigerian couples, regardless of their educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Denga, 1982). Where barrenness is involuntary, the husband and wife tend to blame each other for the inability to produce offsprings.

Nigerian men are polygamous in nature but the existence of other women in the husband's life often leads to quarrels and wife beating. The existence of the other man in the life of the wife is even more serious. Consequently the beating of the wife by her husband as a punishment for suspected flirtation or adultery is regarded as fair and just (Onuaguluchi, 1986).

A refusal to hand over her salary to her husband and refusal to have sex on demand with the husband, are other causes of wife beating in Nigerian society (Lemmon,

1985). Finally, as women become increasingly emancipated in this modern era, young husbands feel threatened in their positions as superiors and armed with the cultural rebirth which is now sweeping through the country (Nigeria), they resort to brute force in an attempt to drive it home to their wives that the woman's place is in the kitchen (Onuaguluchi, 1986).

#### Process of Acculturation

With a conservative United Nations estimate of 120 million people, Nigeria is the most populated nation in Africa. However, it was only in the past twenty years that the United States has experienced an influx of Nigerian immigrants. In June 2001, the United States Census Survey documented that Nigerian immigrants make up 2.5% of all immigrants in the United States, and yet the immigrant Nigerian community continues to increase at a rapid pace.

In spite of limited resources for the foreign-born, people continue to immigrate to the United States with the hope that a new place and a new life will be better. And when immigrants come to this country, they do not leave behind their values, attitudes, traditions, and

beliefs. They bring along with them their own traditions, in the hope that these traditions will serve them well in their quest to adapt to their new home.

When Nigerians or any other race immigrate to the United States, there is a process referred to as acculturation. This process, along with attempts to meet basic human needs on a daily basis, can produce a very stress filled experience for the immigrants (Ho, 1987).

Acculturation significantly impacts the immigrant family and this term needs to be defined and understood. The term "acculturation" has been defined simply as being the adoption of an ethnic minority person of the dominant culture in which he or she is immersed (Lum, 1986). Although the definition of acculturation may appear clear and simple, it is by no means simple.

There are degrees of acculturation. A person may maintain his or her own cultural beliefs, values, and customs from his or her country of origin to a greater or lesser extent (Ho, 1987). A study by Sluzki (1979) identified five discrete stages of acculturation. Sluzki associated each stage with a different type of family conflict and coping patterns. The first two stages occur with the preparation and actual act of immigrating to a



new cultural environment. The third stage is an identified as a period of overcompensation. This stage is characterized by a "heightened level of activity focused on survival and the satisfaction of primary need" (p. 381).

The fourth stage contains a difficult, crisis-ridden period of de-compensation. The family has reached its destination and is now confronted with the task of reformulating its new environment. This is the stage where family members begin to step back and take a more realistic view of their situation. The family begins to realize the serious and difficult task they have taken on. Disappointment may surface and should be acknowledged. In addition, the realization of the losses associated with leaving their native homeland may rupture the defense system that was initially created during the third stage and period of overcompensation.

The final stage produces a clash between generations, which is intercultural as well as intergenerational. It is in these last two stages that the family may be compelled to have contact with mental health services (Sluzki, 1979).

It is apparent that immigration and acculturation can cause a tremendous amount of stress for the family. Members of the family, both young and old, are faced with learning a new language, new social norms, and many other factors that may clash with their native upbringing. Feelings of isolation and despair are common among new immigrants. The family structure may also suffer as a result of acculturation. Restructuring of roles and functions may occur (Ho, 1987). For example, the traditional hierarchical structure may experience conflict as a result of the father/husband becoming unemployed.

Ho (1987) suggested that children have an easier time acculturating. This may threaten parents who may become dependent upon their children for translation and community updates. The faster rate of acculturation among the young immigrants may increase stresses and conflicts within the family (Ho, 1987). For Nigerian population, in which hierarchical structure places the father/husband in the dominant role, a conflict may occur when the woman's employment status may become essential to the family's survival but it also can threaten the role of the father as the dominant provider. Poor economic conditions and

stress connection with the acculturation process can produce many conflicting results (Ho, 1987).

Despite the literature that describes the process of acculturation and its importance, professional literature does not adequately acknowledge or address the consequences of acculturation. Some theoretical writings that focus on minorities imply that the process of acculturation produces family conflict and psychological distress. Further, the experience living in two cultures "is inherently conflictive as opposed to enriching" (Curtis, 1990, p. 149). The extent to which dominant cultural behaviors and values are expressed and traditional native values are preserved depends on the level of acculturation.

#### Summary

This section presented an overview of wife abuse and domestic violence, and a definition of the process of acculturation. While the laws about wife abuse changed in favor of woman, here in the United States and Nigeria, the issue of domestic violence has not been resolved because of the complexities of human nature, the attitudes of society and perplexing structural barriers.

The issue of domestic violence is not a simple one to understand. In past studies several theoretical frameworks were offered to understand domestic violence. However, as many researchers of the subject have discovered, one or more theories to explain domestic violence did not completely offer simple solutions and explanation of the many variables involved.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This research project explored the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants in the United States. A qualitative method of research was used with ten subjects interviewed. A qualitative method allowed the researcher to explore in details, how Nigerian immigrants view domestic violence in American Society.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was; 1) to explore the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants in the United State, 2) to examine how acculturation impacts Nigerian perception of domestic violence and their help seeking behaviors for counseling. This study focused on married Nigerian immigrant community in San Bernardino and Riverside county of California. The aim of this research was to add to the existing knowledge of how domestic violence is perceived among immigrants.

### Sampling

The population of interest for this study included married Nigerian born immigrants in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties of California. Participants were solicited from the Mbaise Family Association through the Nigerian Association of Southern California (NASCA). NASCA is an umbrella organization of Nigerians in Southern California with the main office in Pomona, and has membership open to every Nigerian in Southern California. Participants were randomly selected from the address and phone numbers of the registered members of NASCA to ensure an accurate representation of the Nigerian population. An introductory letter was sent to about thirty households and only one participant per household was selected.

A face-to-face interview was conducted in English language because in Nigeria, the primary spoken language is the British English language or broken English. Ten participants were selected and interviewed. Participants were selected with the following criteria: Nigerian decent, born in Nigeria, ages 18 and above, married and must have lived in the United States for at least one year. Once confirmed eligible, participants were

recruited using a Standard informed consent protocol (see Appendix B).

### Data Collection and Instruments

For the purpose of exploring the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants, data was collected via a qualitative exploratory design.

Before the interview, each participant received a written statement describing the study. They were asked to sign an informed consent form. The interview was audio recorded in order to document accurate information. The interview questions were: (see Appendix A)

### Procedure

The interview was conducted face-to-face. The researcher set up an appointment with those who agreed to participate in the interview and met with them at their house. The researcher introduced himself and the purpose of the study to the participants. The participants were given the consent form and the debriefing statement. The researcher alone conducted the interview. Each interview lasted about 30-40 minutes. Each participant was interviewed separately.

### Protection of Human Subjects

To ensure the confidentiality of study participants, the names and identifying data were not used. Limiting the number of individuals who reviewed the narrative data to the research advisor and the researcher ensured confidentiality of the collected data.

The data was locked at the researcher's home during the study. Once the questionnaires were collected and analyzed, the narrative data was destroyed.

If in the process of talking about their views about domestic violence, the subject felt uncomfortable or uneasy, they could have stopped at any time during the study. Referral phone numbers were provided in the debriefing statement in case participants needed counseling services (see Appendix C). If immediate attention were required this researcher would stop the interview in order to make appointment referral to counseling center for crisis intervention. This research approval for protection of human subjects was obtained from the department of social work Subcommittee of the Institutional Review Board of California State University, San Bernardino. The participants were given debriefing statements with the names of the researcher



and the advisor in case they have any questions concerning the study (see Appendix C).

### Data Analysis

A qualitative methodology was used to uncover and understand participant's perceptions of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants. Analysis also included demographic factors such as age, gender, marital and employment status, and other variables that influenced the participants' perception of domestic violence.

Open coding was used to identify themes from each item in the questionnaire. Axial coding was done to identify themes across respondents. When it was determined that an idea or event was unlike any other previously recorded, a new category was opened in order to record that event.

### Summary

This study explored the perception of domestic violence among Nigerian immigrants in the United States. The method and procedure of this study insured that the participants were protected at all times. Since this study was qualitative in nature, and the sample was small in size the results may not be generalized to reflect the

entire population of the Nigerian immigrant community. It is hoped that this study provided information that could be used to generate further studies for this population

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Presentation of the Findings

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section presents the demographic and descriptive profile of the sample. The second section discusses the perception of domestic violence among Nigerians along six dimensions. The first dimension discusses the definition of domestic violence. The second dimension discusses attitude towards the use of interpersonal violence. The third dimension discusses their perception on causes of domestic violence. The fourth dimension discusses the justification or condemnation of domestic violence. The fifth dimension discusses the strategies for coping with domestic violence and help seeking behaviors for counseling. The sixth dimension discusses their post immigration views on domestic violence.

#### Demographic and Descriptive Profile of the Sample

This study examined the perception of domestic violence among Nigerians and their help seeking behavior. Ten married Nigerian (5 men and 5 women) were interviewed face to face. The respondents ranged from 30 to 59 years

of age. All participants (100%) have children and the number of their children ranged from 1 to 6.

All of the respondents are presently employed. Household income of these respondents ranged from \$40,000.00 to \$200,000.00. Eighty percent reported that they own their own homes. None of them received any financial aid from the US government. Fifty percent of the respondents reported that they have other adults living with them.

All the respondents (100%) considered their Nigerian ethnic background to be Ibo. They were all born in Nigeria. Number of years respondents have lived in the United States ranged from 5 to 30 years. Sixty percent had been in the United States for more than ten years. Of the respondents, 70% were catholic (Roman) and 30% reported that they are Christians.

#### Definition of Domestic Violence

Participants in the study were asked to respond to an open-ended question about their own definition of domestic violence. Content analysis of the responses revealed that most of the definitions referred domestic violence to acts of verbal, emotional and physical abuse. Sexual and economic abuses were not mentioned. 90% of the

respondents mentioned the use of physical force in controlling partner's actions either men or women or woman to man as domestic violence. A 37 year-old woman defined domestic violence as:

"A way of controlling your partner's actions, thoughts and feelings with force; it can take many forms including pushing, punching, slapping, using weapons kicking and scratching."

Another 30-year-old woman defined domestic violence as;

"An act of abuse physically either by a man to a woman or a woman to a man"

Respondents mentioned hitting and striking more frequently (80%), followed by beating and fighting (30%) throwing objects and pushing one's spouse (10%).

Acts that conform with definitions of verbal and emotional abuse include: threatening to use a butcher knife on ones spouse (10%), checking up on one's spouse all the time (40%), criticizing one's spouse in front of others (30%), not allowing spouse to make any decisions (50%), basing decisions on one's own parents and not spouse's (50%), cursing and humiliating spouse in front of relatives (20%); insulting and humiliating spouse in the presence of strangers (70%); ridiculing the spouse's family (80%).

Respondents also mentioned financial abuse like not giving money to spouse to buy things (50%); and not allowing spouse to have a bank account in his/her name (50%) as forms of domestic violence. Three respondent (30%) mentioned psychological acts of abuse but would not elaborate on what that meant.

#### Attitudes Towards the Use of Interpersonal Violence

In order to understand Nigerian's perception on the use of interpersonal violence, respondents in the study were asked to describe their feelings when they saw a form of domestic violence in their friend family in Nigeria and their Nigerian American families. Of all the respondents, 20% (n = 2) indicated that they did not see any form of domestic violence in Nigeria. A 45 year-old man said:

"I did not see that; I come from a Christian family, so I never saw anybody beaten up. Physical means should not be used to settle misunderstandings."

Another 45-year-old man responded in the following way;

"I was raised in Nigeria culture, I never saw a couple-the man assaulting the woman. It is not common among my culture to see couples fighting. Usually when there are misunderstandings the parties will call the

village to help settle the matter before it turns into a physical fight."

However, they indicated that violence should not be used in solving problems. Eighty percent (n = 8) of the respondents stated that they feel bad about it whether in Nigerian families or Nigerian American families. They were of the opinion that hitting is not an effective way of solving problems. A 45 year-old woman responded in the following way:

"I feel bad because it is not a common thing to see, so usually if you see a couple fight, you feel bad. Couples should just talk things over and resolve it"

A 30-year-old woman had this to say:

"Back in Nigeria as a young adult woman, I saw domestic violence like a man hitting his wife or vice versa, I felt bad and here in America I feel bad about it because being here and learning about domestic violence and seeing how dangerous and how deadly it can be, I don't feel right seeing it happen to my friends or family."

More women (n = 5) than men (n = 3) indicated that hitting should not be used as a problem solving strategy; rather a non-violent means should be used. 30% (n = 3) of the male respondents indicated that in Nigeria they saw the use of violence in Nigeria families as normal. They indicated that they saw it as a way of resolving issues

in the family that both couples understand. A

fifty-year-old man responded in this way;

"All that time I had no major feelings towards it. Some were a form of resolving issues in the family which both couples understand violence to be the only way to resolve the issues in the family and the extended family members also view it as a way to resolve issues in the family."

#### Attitudes Towards Causes of Domestic Violence

Participants in the study were asked to mention what they perceive are the causes of domestic violence. All the participants mentioned financial disputes.

Respondents were asked to elaborate on how financial disputes could cause domestic violence. Gender differences in perception of causes of domestic were noted. Five women (50%) indicated that conflict could arise when men do not allow women to make some financial decisions in the house; a forty-six year old woman has this to say:

"Even when women work and bring more money home than men, they still want to be in control of the money and will not let women contribute in making decisions on how the money should be used"

Five men (50%) stated that conflict could arise when women want to make major financial decisions in the house



because they work and sometimes bring more money home. A fifty six year old man had this to say:

"When women work and bring more money in the house, they want to put the man down by trying to decide how the money should be used"

Other causes of domestic violence mentioned by participants were as follows: Women wanting to make more decisions in the house (50%); the permissiveness of American culture (50%). A fifty-four year old man said;

"Part of the causes could be the acculturation some Nigerians are going through in America; trying to behave the way they perceive other members of the American culture behaves which is not acceptable in Nigerian culture"

In addition, respondents reported the following factors contributing to domestic violence. Belief that women are the property of men (80%); beliefs that men are the head of the family (80%); belief that women should be obedient (80%); job pressure (100%); an overcrowded house, having one's in-laws live in the household (50%); stress from immigrating to the united states (100%); inability to control a bad temper (70%); inability to talk to spouse (100%); arguments that get out of hand (70%); and lack of trust in a marriage (100%).

All of the women (n = 5) mentioned barrenness as a potential source of conflict in many Nigerian families.

They attributed this to the way procreation is upheld among African families. They indicated that procreation was the major aim of marriage in many Nigerian families.

A thirty-seven year old woman said:

"In Nigerian families, married women are not only expected to bear children, they are also expected to have male children. Barren wives suffer from physical assaults from their husbands and unbearable humiliation from their in-laws often aimed at pushing them out of the matrimonial homes so that a new wife will come and bear children."

#### Justification or Condemnation of Domestic Violence

The respondents in the study were asked the following questions: Do you agree that in certain situations spouse has a right to beat their spouse? 70% (n = 7) of the respondents disagreed and the rest 30% (n = 3) indicated that they agree with the statement. Those who agreed were asked to specify cases in which spouses are justified to beat their spouses. These three respondents indicated these reasons to justify their agreement. Protecting a child (n = 3); self defense (n = 3); spouse is screaming hysterically (n = 3); wife does not want to have sex (n = 3); talking back to the husband in front of his friends (n = 3); woman's repeated emphasis on her independence and career, which takes

precedence over her commitment to home and family (n = 3); women neglecting household duties in general and the spouse and children in particular (n = 3).

Of the seven respondents who disagreed with the statement, 5 women (50%) argued that women should be treated as equal to men and not to be treated as animals.

A 30-year-old woman cited the following argument:

"Since women are equal to men, it is possible to negotiate with them on the basis of mutual understanding and openness; women should not be treated as animals who only understands beating"

#### Coping with Domestic Violence and Help Seeking Behavior for Counseling

In order to understand Nigerian American strategies for coping with domestic violence and their help seeking behavior, for counseling, participants in the study were asked the following open-ended questions: - If your daughter tells you that her spouse beats her, how will you react? What will you tell her to do?

Content analysis of the responses reveals that all the participants did not advocate passive or submissive response to domestic violence and all participants indicated that coping with domestic violence should begin

with the nuclear family. A 46-year-old woman made the following comment:

"If my daughter told me that her spouse beats her, I would be very angry. First of all, I would advise her to try talking to him directly without involving people from the outside. She must not remain silent about her spouse's violence, yet she should not let others know what is happening in her family."

A 37-year-old man responded as follows;

"I would advise my daughter to let me and my spouse mediate between them, but to keep the problem within the family and see if our intervention helps"

All the participants indicated that their first step would be to try and resolve the problem between them. A forty-two year old man responded as follows:

"I will call her, talk to her to find out what the situation and problem is, and I will also call her spouse, and talk with her and try to resolve the problem for them. They need to understand, listen, and respect each other's feelings and be able to work together as a couple."

A fifty-four year old man had this to say:

"I will try to look into the issues involved; the circumstances that led to the violence, and if she is wrong, I would point it out to her that she is wrong and try to resolve the situation."

A 36-year-old woman made the following comment:

"I would not take it lightly, however, personally I would talk to both of them and

listen to both parties, and discuss the problem with them and give them a second chance."

Sixty percent (n = 6) of the participants indicated that it is not desirable in their society to involve the police and forty percent (n = 4) indicated that they would recommend reporting to the police in extremely difficult cases. A 42-year-old man said;

"Clearly, involving the police in cases of domestic violence is not desirable in our society; personally, I don't think it is respectable to go to the police either for the spouse or for the family"

A fifty-four year old man said;

"If I'm convinced that we have done everything we can to prevent our son-in-law from beating our daughter and he continues to do so, particularly if the neighbors know about it; I would recommend that she call the police."

Only 10%, (n = 1) of the participants in the study indicated that they would recommend divorce for their daughter only in the most severe cases, after every other option has been tried. A 45-year-old man responded in the following way;

"By no means should she immediately consider divorce just because her spouse beats her; if my daughter is beaten by her spouse, I will do everything I can to help her; I would only encourage her to divorce her spouse if I'm convinced that there is absolutely no other choice"

Only 20% (n = 2) of the participants indicated that they would recommend that their daughter seek help from social services for counseling or therapy. A 30-year-old woman said;

"I will counsel him about domestic violence; I'm not just going to pull my girl out of the marriage, but I will counsel the man, then if it happens again, I will suggest for them to go to marriage counseling."

#### Post Immigration Views on Domestic Violence

Respondents were asked whether their views or opinions about domestic violence have changed since their coming to America. All the participants in the study indicated that their views about domestic violence have changed. Respondents were asked to describe the ways in which their opinions have changed. All the women respondents (50%) indicated that coming to America has created a moral awareness to them on how domestic violence is a serious problem. A 37-year-old woman responded in the following way:

"Yes, it did change, because there in Nigeria one always thought it was a form of discipline, people irrespective of what is happening, whether trivial or something serious, they keep beating, slapping, kicking, hitting, and denying food. But coming to America made me realize that it is a serious abuse that can never be done to any human being; and that was a nice awareness, and I wish I would have the

opportunity to make my people understand that it needs to stop"

All the men indicated that their opinion changed because of the way cases of domestic violence are handled in American society.

A fifty-three year old man responded in this way:

"Yes, my views have changed; the environment actually changed my views, even though it is not okay for the man to beat the wife; in Nigeria if it happened, we have family structures to deal with the situation right away. Here in America, it is a difficult thing, you know the consequences are very ugly and the prices you have to pay is very enormous; so bearing that in mind you do everything you can to avoid that because the moment you try it you will find yourself in a very difficult situation."

Respondents were further asked: If your views have changed, do you think you are more or less accepting of domestic violence? All the respondents indicated that they are less accepting of domestic violence. When asked if they would do anything different if they see domestic violence now; some contradictory responses were noted. 30% (n = 3) of the respondents indicated that they would call or report to the police. 50% (n = 5) indicated that they would get involved and talk to the parties involved to help them solve their problem. 10% (n = 1) of the respondents indicated that they would first of all

analyze the situation and weigh the pros and cons of getting involved in helping the family to resolve their situation. One respondent (10%) indicated that he would not do anything different; he responded in the following way:

"In my own opinion, I would not do anything different; people do quarrel, so it is something that is common."

Responses from the respondent indicate that their views have only changed in principles but in actuality they still believe in the traditional ways of resolving problems within the family.

#### Summary

Respondents in the study demonstrated their awareness of domestic violence as a serious problem. They defined domestic violence in terms of verbal, emotional and physical acts of abuse. Nigerian men and women did not agree with the use of violence in the home or that hitting is an effective problem solving strategy. Domestic violence was attributed to structural, environment and individual factors. Gender differences in their perception were noted. The findings suggested that culture has a strong influence on their help seeking



behavior for counseling. They still believe in the close-knit nature of the family.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSIONS

#### Introduction

Included in chapter five was a presentation of the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study. Furthermore, the recommendations extracted from the study were presented. Lastly, the chapter ended with a summary that Nigerian immigrants perceived domestic violence as a serious societal problem; and that culture, gender and acculturation level simultaneously affect their perceptions of domestic violence. They still believe in the close-knit nature of the family-that families should resolve problems privately without outside interference.

#### Discussion

Nigerian men and women generally defined domestic violence in terms of physical, verbal and emotional acts of abuse. Only three respondents mentioned psychological acts of abuse as a form of domestic violence but could not elaborate on what that mean. Psychological abuse is more difficult to conceptualize. Nigerians tend to downplay psychological problems and thus, it may be more difficult to acknowledge. The fact that a third of the

respondents mentioned psychological abuse as a form of domestic violence may be attributed to media attention on domestic violence here in the United States that call attention to this form of abuse.

Married Nigerian men and women respondents in the study did not define sexual abuse as domestic violence. Married Nigerian couples may view disagreements about sexual matters as an element of marital life experience but do not see it as a problem. However, in the Nigerian society, sex is seen as a taboo and is not discussed in the public. This may explain why respondents in the study did not mention sexual abuse as a form of domestic violence. Further, explanation of this could be related to the Nigerian criminal law which asserts that the husband cannot commit the offense of rape on the wife, and the police cannot prosecute a case of rape reported by a wife against her husband (Balogun, 1986); the exception being of course if the spouses have been separated legally. However, this does not necessarily imply that they would view sexual abuse as less serious form of domestic violence.

### Attitudes Toward the Use of Interpersonal Violence

Married Nigerian respondents in the study indicated that violence should not be used in solving problems in the family. They indicated that non-violent tactics should be used to settle disputes among couples. This response was not expected because physical violence is a learned behavior, acceptable within Nigerian culture (Obayi, 1986). Thus, the findings of this study are incongruent with traditional practices and beliefs. Although both Nigerian men and women indicated disapproval in using interpersonal violence, women respondents showed more indication of disapproval. This could be explained by the values endorsed in the western male sub-culture, which supports the use of physical force and reinforces men's sense of masculinity. In Nigerian family structure, men are viewed as the authority figure whereas women are socialized to defer to the male head (Obayi, 1986). Thus, cultural notions of male privilege and authority may contribute to this gender difference.

### Attitudes Towards the Causes of Domestic Violence

Married Nigerian respondents in the study tend to view structural and environmental factors as explanation for domestic violence. The fact that women want joint financial decision making in the home could be attributed to the changing traditional family roles. Customarily, a woman is not permitted to work outside the home because this would reduce her financial dependency on her husband (Obbe, 1980). For Nigerian women respondents, life in the United States has provided them with economic opportunities to improve their family status relative to their husbands. Nigeria women respondents in the study could therefore argue that since they are required to make financial contribution to the family; they should also contribute in the financial decision-making. Nigerian men respondents in the study could attribute women's involvement in financial decision making as a gender role violation in the marriage. In Nigerian traditional families, husbands usually have the final authority on a variety of family issues including financial decisions making (Obayi, 1986). Women are expected to hand over their salaries to their husbands. The involvement of women in economic activities does not

imply an equal gender relationship. The continued belief about men's privilege and authority may contribute to these gender differences in perception about who should make financial decisions in the family.

#### Attitudes on Justification of Domestic Violence

Findings from the study indicated that majority of the respondents tended to condemn domestic violence. This means that they see domestic violence as a serious societal problem. This finding seems to point to the acculturation level of most Nigerian respondents in the study. Those who have been in the United States over fifteen years tend to favor western cultural perspectives. The fact that Nigerian women respondents in the study were demanding for women equality treatment by men could be explained by the economic improvement of their status that has largely strengthened their desire to fight for gender equality and to maintain positive relationship between the spouses.

The justification of domestic violence can be interpreted within the socio-cultural context of Nigerian society which emphasizes feminine qualities of women and masculine qualities for men (Obayi, 1986); the wife's commitment to obey her husband, and the honor and

reputation of the husband's and wife's families of origin. In addition, emphasis is placed on the wife's primary commitment to her family's welfare rather than on her right to self actualization (Obayi, 1986).

The justification of domestic violence to cases of self-defense could be attributed to their level of acculturation and assimilation into the American Society.

#### Coping with Domestic Violence

The findings of the study indicated that married Nigerian men and women respondents did not advocate passive or submissive responses to violence. However, they indicated that coping with domestic violence should begin with the nuclear family. By telling their daughter to try and talk to her spouse directly without involving people from the outside reflected a tendency to counter-act wife abuse and at the same time to maintain the essential values of Nigerian society. Respondents indicated that attempts to cope with the problem within and outside of the family should be discreet. They therefore focused on maintaining family privacy. In this connection, they underscored the values of family unity and indicated that attempts to counteract violence should stress the wife's commitment to respect her husband. This

could also reflect the tendency of Nigerian cultural belief that the wife should support her husband and understand the condition of his life while also opposing wife abuse in principle. However, this discreet and internal process of managing domestic violence can be detrimental if the problem persists despite confrontation from family members.

#### Sources of Help-seeking Behavior

The findings from the study indicated that married Nigerian men and women would use the family first as a source of help. This is consistent with the study literature. Nigerian men and women usually would use the family first as a resource to seek help because of the Nigerian emphasis on close family ties. They would feel an obligation to seek the help of elders or parents out of respect. The explanation to this notion could be that the respondents in the study still believe that their brothers, sisters, or other elder relatives here in the United States would be able to help them appropriately as their parents or elders would. However, this was not expected; given their length of stay in America, one would expect a different view.



In addition, the findings of this study indicated that Nigerian men and women respondents would tend not to use the helping professionals as a resource for help. It is possible that they are not familiar with their services. However, the fact that one fifth of the respondents indicated that they will refer their daughter and her husband for counseling is an indication of embracing western perspective of help seeking behavior.

The respondents in the study indicated that they would only use the police in extreme difficulties when other means have been utilized and not successful. This could be explained by the old notion Nigerians have about the police. In Nigerian society the police are perceived as a punitive, oppressive and exploiting agent, and not as a protective agent that promotes the welfare of the Nigerian population. Women who report cases of domestic violence to the police may lose the sympathy of their friends and community; and the police have no consideration for well-being and cohesion of Nigeria families. In addition, the husband may construe police involvement as an attempt by his wife to take revenge and punish him. This might incite him against his wife and even against her family. Similarly, the husband's family

may take such intervention to mean that the wife and her family have no desire for reconciliation. This interpretation of police involvement in the situation may infuriate the husband's entire family and extend the conflict from spousal violence to interfamilial violence. The above explanation is the researcher's experience of the relationship between the Nigerian police and the populace; which could be used to explain why the Nigerian men and women respondents in the study would only tend to use the police in America as their last resort in help seeking.

#### Post Immigration Views of Domestic Violence

The findings of the study indicated that married Nigerian men and women respondents believed that coming to America has changed their views about domestic violence. All the respondents indicated that they are less accepting of domestic violence now. However, their perceptions did not appear to affect their behavior because very few indicated that they will report to the authorities should they see any form of domestic violence now. Majority of the respondents indicated that they would try to help the parties involved to resolve their problems within the family circle. What this means is

that the respondents have recognized that wife beating is illegal in the United States but at the same time, they still believe in family unity. It could also mean that they don't believe in the criminal justice system. A view that the police and the courts are sources of oppression and that social and family relationships should be based on harmony, compassion, and mutual respect could affect their decision not to report to the authorities, to them, reporting to the authorities would lead to the arrest and confinement of their spouse in jails and a possibility of ending their marriage, a situation they may want to avoid.

The fact that the respondents in the study indicated that their stay in America have changed their views about domestic violence implied that they have been acculturated. However, irrespective of their degree of acculturation as conventionally measured by the duration of their stay in America, their socio-cultural attributes continued to exert a strong influence on the way they relate to the authorities. The findings challenge a conventional conceptualization of acculturation as a linear process.

Despite the findings above, the researcher must caution readers that Nigerian families still tend to adhere to a belief that the close-knit nature of the family precludes the possibility of violence as family should resolve such problems privately without outside interference. Obi (1977) states that a Nigerian wife can make a complaint against her husband to senior members of his family or to her parents who will investigate the complaints and resolve them.

#### Limitations

This study presented limitations, which need to be addressed. Only one Nigerian ethnic group- (Ibo) was addressed and they are primarily catholic. Other groups may have different views. The study might produce different findings if the respondents had been from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The size and sample nature of the study were a limitation in this study. The sample size was 10 married Nigerian adults (5 men and 5 women) and the study was exploratory with very specific criteria, therefore the findings of the study may not accurately reflect the views of the larger population of married Nigerian men and women in Riverside and San

Bernardino counties. Also, the respondents were in the middle to upper income levels and this did not represent the population in general. The generalizability of the findings to other married Nigerian men and women should not be assumed until married Nigerian men and women of other Nigerian groups are included.

#### Recommendation for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Similar to other studies on perception of domestic violence, Nigerian respondents in the study demonstrated a growing awareness of the problem. However, Nigerian respondent did not see sexual act of abuse as a form of domestic problem. Therefore the researcher recommends interventions by social work practitioners in the form of education, program development and counseling in making them understand the serious implication of sexual abuse by a partner.

In this study, variations in perceptions of domestic violence emerged across gender. These variations can be used to determine appropriate vehicles for disseminating information. The strong perceived cultural influences on women's respondents response to perception of domestic violence call for an increase in the number, scope and

effectiveness of intervention and prevention programs in the United States in order to meet the need of this population of Nigerian descent. Considering the strong cultural proscription against help-seeking, outreach efforts to this population must address cultural barriers to recognition of abuse and to help-seeking.

Culturally-rooted values and expectation, such as stoicism and perseverance, need to be viewed as a source of strength for these women who are coping with adverse cultural influence. The researcher therefore recommends for social work professionals to design support groups for women of this specific cultural background which may serve as a safe and effective place to discuss negative aspects of their culture, while collectively validating the importance of cultural values in their lives.

In American society victims of spousal abuse are expected to call the police and asked, under subpoena at times, to testify against the perpetrator. This approach is contradictory to cultural proscription. In the cases of women of Nigerian descent, policies that rely on the criminal justice system may be ineffective or even harmful. The lack of applicability of these strategies to various socio-cultural groups (including Nigeria) in the

United States should prompt policy makers and advocates to re-evaluate the current dominant strategies.

However, social workers should continue to educate the Nigerian and African community as a whole, about the seriousness of wife abuse, as well as other types of abuse. With more and more families from Nigeria and other African countries immigrating to the United States, it is important that social workers make a concerted effort to reach out to these new immigrants to provide information and support. Social workers must be sensitive to the cultural norms of this group. They should realize that in many African countries the use of corporal punishment is a normal disciplinary technique and therefore understand that possible resistance to help-seeking is due to culture.

As previously indicated, this study was limited by size and type of the sample. Future research should include a large number of married Nigerian men and women as well as those from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Comparable studies using other African men and women should be conducted. In addition, future research needs to examine perception of domestic violence among unmarried couples in Nigerian-American families.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study, suggest that culture, gender, and acculturation level- (conventionally measured by length of stay in America) could simultaneously affect married Nigerian men and women's perception of domestic violence. They still believe in the close-knit nature of the family.



APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE

**QUESTIONNAIRE**  
Open Ended Questions

- 1a. How would you define domestic violence?
- 1b. (Prompt question) Do you consider these to be abuse?
- Physical ----- Why  
  Why not
- Sexual ----- Why  
  Why not
- Psychological- ----- Why  
  Why not
- Emotional ----- Why  
  Why not
- 2a. (i) When you were in Nigeria, you saw some forms of domestic violence going on in your friend's family, how did you feel?
- (ii) Here in the US, how do you feel when you see a form of domestic violence going on in Nigerian families?
- (iii) What do you think are the causes of all those violence?
- 2b. People hold varying opinions about domestic violence; do you agree that in certain situations spouse has a right to beat their spouse?
- If you agree, can you give a reason/situation where it is justified to beat spouse?
- 2c. If your daughter tells you that her spouse beats her, how will you react? What will you tell her?
3. Since your coming to America, have your opinions or views about domestic changed? -(prompt question) In what ways?
4. If your views have changed, do you think you are
- i. (a) more accepting of domestic violence? Give examples.
- i. (b) less accepting of domestic violence? Give examples.
- ii. Would you do anything different if you see domestic violence now?

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

### Informed Consent

This study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to understand how Nigerian immigrants view domestic violence in American society. Francis I. Nwagbara is conducting this study under the auspices of California State University, San Bernardino, where he is a graduate student.

Your participation will consist of a face-to-face interview for approximately 30-40 minutes with Francis I. Nwagbara. In addition the interview will be audio recorded with your permission.

Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty and you may withdraw from the study at any time. There is no known risk involved in participating in this study nor are there any direct benefits to you. Participation in this study will be confidential and your identity will not be revealed.

This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work sub-committee of the Institutional Review Board at California State University, San Bernardino, to ensure that the participants are safeguarded from injury or harm, resulting from such participation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact my faculty supervisor Dr. Trang Hoang at (909) 880-5559.

By placing a check mark on the space below you acknowledge that you have been informed of and understand the nature and purpose of this study, and freely consent to participate. You acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age, <sup>USC</sup> was born in Nigeria, and have been in the United States at least one year.

Place a check mark here \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to have my interview audio-recorded.

\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_ No

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO  
SOCIAL WORK INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD SUB-COMMITTEE

APPROVED 5/3/04 VOID AFTER 2/3/05

IRB# 50042 CHAIR [Signature]

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

### **Debriefing Statement**

The research project that you have participated in is designed to understand how Nigerian immigrants view domestic violence in American society. Little research has been done on Nigerian immigrants in general and therefore this study is important to help us understand how Nigerian immigrants respond to domestic violence in American society.

As a result of your participation in the study, if you feel you need counseling relating to domestic violence, you can call these numbers: 800-775-6055 for Shelter from the Storm and 800-339-7233 for Horizon House. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Trang Hoang at (909) 880-5559.

If you are interested in the results of this study, they can be found on the campus of California State University, San Bernardino in the Pfau Library after June of 2004.

Thank you again for participating in this study.

APPENDIX D  
DEMOGRAPHICS

## DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Please indicate your age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you have children? Yes or No.
- 2a. If yes, how many children do you have?
3. What is your yearly family income?  
\_\_\_\_\_ under \$9999.00                      \_\_\_\_\_ \$10,000- 19,999.00  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$20,000- 29,999.00                      \_\_\_\_\_ \$30,000- 39,999.00  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$40,000-49,999.00                      \_\_\_\_\_ \$50,000- 59,999.00  
\_\_\_\_\_ over \$60,000
4. Do you receive any of the following types of aides from the government?  
\_\_\_\_\_ food stamps                      \_\_\_\_\_ social security  
\_\_\_\_\_ Supplemental Security Income (SSI)                      \_\_\_\_\_ general assistance  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_                      \_\_\_\_\_ none
5. Are you presently employed? Yes or No
6. Is your husband/wife presently employed? Yes or No
7. Are there other adult relatives or non-relatives living in your home? Yes or No
8. Do you own or rent a house?
9. How long have you lived in America?
10. What is your Nigerian ethnic background?
11. What is your religious background?



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